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For the full text of the Commission's December 2008 report on Iraq, please [click here](#)
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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recommends that Iraq be designated as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), in light of the ongoing, severe abuses of religious freedom and the Iraqi government's toleration of these abuses, particularly abuses against Iraq's smallest, most vulnerable religious minorities. [1] "The lack of effective government action to protect these communities from abuses has established Iraq among the most dangerous places on earth for religious minorities," said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer.

While there has been some reconciliation between Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis, concerns remain regarding attacks and tense relations between these groups.

The situation is especially dire for Iraq's smallest religious minorities, including ChaldoAssyrian and other Christians, Sabeen Mandaean, and Yazidis.

These groups do not have militia or tribal structures to protect them and do not receive adequate official protection.

Their members continue to experience targeted violence and to flee to other areas within Iraq or other countries, where the minorities represent a disproportionately high percentage among Iraqi refugees.

Marginalized legally, politically, and economically, they are caught in the middle of a struggle between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the central Iraqi government for control of northern areas where their communities are concentrated.

"The combined effect of all this has been to endanger these ancient communities' very existence in Iraq," Gaer said.

The marginalization has been felt in elections, too.

In the January 2005 elections, many non-Muslims in Nineveh governorate were disenfranchised due to fraud, intimidation, and the refusal by Kurdish security forces to permit ballot boxes to be distributed.

Most recently, the provincial elections law passed in late September 2008 by the Iraqi parliament was, at the last minute, stripped of Article 50, a provision that would have guaranteed a set number of seats in provincial councils to minorities.

Although an amendment was later adopted, it set aside fewer seats than the original provision, leading minority leaders to denounce the law.

The Commission urges the incoming U.S. administration to take steps designed to ensure:

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safe and fair provincial elections;
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security and safety for all Iraqis;
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the prevention of abuses against religious minorities is a high priority;
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the KRG upholds minority rights;

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U.S. financial assistance is refocused;

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religious extremism is countered and respect for human rights is protected; and

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the situation of internally displaced persons and refugees is addressed effectively.

Among the specific recommendations put forward in the report, in addition to working to ensure safe and fair elections, the Commission calls on the U.S. government to:

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urge the Iraqi government to urgently establish, fund, train, and deploy police units for vulnerable minority communities that are as representative as possible of those communities, ensure that minority police recruits are not excluded from nor discriminated against in the recruitment process, in promotion and command leadership opportunities, or in the terms and conditions of their employment, and ensure to the maximum extent possible that such police units remain in their locations of origin and are not transferred to other cities as has been done in the past;

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urge the Iraqi government to ensure that Iraqi government revenues neither are directed to nor indirectly support any militia, para-state actor, or other organization credibly charged with involvement in severe human rights abuses;

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urge the Iraqi government to work with minority communities and their representatives to

develop measures to implement Article 125 of the Iraqi constitution, which guarantees "the administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights of the various nationalities, such as Turkomen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, and all the other constituents," in Nineveh and other areas where these groups are concentrated;

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urge the Iraqi government to enact constitutional amendments to strengthen human rights guarantees in the Iraqi Constitution, including by deleting sub-clause (A) in Article 2 that no law may contradict "the established provisions of Islam," because it heightens sectarian tensions over which interpretation of

Islam prevails and improperly makes theological interpretations into constitutional questions
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press the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Kurdish officials in neighboring governorates to cease alleged interference with the creation, training, and deployment of representative police forces for minority communities, and link progress on representative policing to U.S. financial assistance and other forms of interaction with the KRG
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appoint and immediately dispatch a Special Envoy for Human Rights in Iraq to Embassy Baghdad, reporting directly to the Secretary of State, to serve as the United States' lead human rights official in Iraq, to lead an Embassy human rights working group, including the senior coordinators on Article 140 issues, on corruption, and on the rule of law, as well as other relevant officials including those focusing on minority issues, and to coordinate U.S. efforts to promote and protect human rights in Iraq;

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amend the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program's new P2 category to allow Iraq's smallest, most vulnerable religious minorities direct access to the program; in addition, family reunification should be expanded for these refugees with relatives in the United States to include not only immediate family members, but as has been done in prior refugee crisis situations, to also include extended family such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, etc.; and

ensure that members of Iraq's smallest, most vulnerable religious minorities scheduled to be resettled to the United States are not delayed unnecessarily by (1) providing adequate personnel to conduct background screening procedures, and (2) enforcing proper application of the existing waiver of the material support bar to those forced to provide support to terrorists under duress.

“The United States must keep religious freedom and other fundamental human rights at the top of the agenda as it develops and implements policies to help Iraq and the entire Gulf region achieve stability and security,” Gaer said.

“As we work with governments, we must never lose sight of the people they must serve, including the most vulnerable.”

[\[1\]](#) Four Commissioners dissented from the recommendation, believing that government action, complicity, or willful indifference has not been sufficiently established to warrant designating Iraq a CPC. Their views are contained in the Executive Summary.